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Editorial Book Review

The U-2 Affair: A Curious Flaw. In The Machinery Of Espionage

THE U-2 AFFAIR. By David White & Thomas B. Ross. Random House. 236 pages. \$4.95

Espionage long has been the hallmark of the sophisticated nation. The world of diplomacy, with its inherent distrusts and sophistry, feeds noisily on the morsels gathered by the anonymous "agents" working beneath the civilities.

But espionage, for all of its romanticism and thrills, remains a basically amoral game, untouched by propriety or law. It is a lonely game which attracts, for the most part, the individual who spurns the common world for bigger dreams.

A modified version of the U-2, was conducting scheduled invasions of Soviet air space.

But the U-2 plane was an entirely new concept of air intelligence. Built by Clarence "Kelly" Johnson, a Lockheed engineer, the U-2 was designed expressly for "over-Russia" missions. Based on the glider principle, the "black lady of espionage" (as Russian ground crews called it in their logs) was powered by two huge jet engines capable of carrying the plane to altitudes approaching 70,000 feet. On extremely long runs, the U-2 pilots feathered their engines, conserving fuel during long glider sweeps.

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The U-2 operation was the brainchild of the Central Intelligence Agency. Although clearly an arm of CIA, "cover stories" — in case of trouble — listed the U-2 as a weather reconnaissance ship operating under the National Space and Aeronautics Agency. As in most CIA operations, every angle had been scrutinized — up to a point. Every possibility of mishap was considered — up to a point. And when President Eisenhower was given the prepared U-2 portfolio, these "points" bothered the old combat veteran.

"What if the plane should be shot down?" Eisenhower asked.

"But it won't be," CIA officials countered.

"But what if it should?" the President persisted.

The question was never satisfactorily answered.

The crash of the Powers U-2, the subsequent explosion of the 1961 summit conference and the Powers trial were heavily documented by the world's press. The authors point out that the U-2 operation was a complete break with the traditional methods of espionage. They might also have said that the policy methods employed in Washington after the crash were equally revolutionary.

The U-2 crashed on May 1. On May 5, after Premier Khrushchev disclosed that the plane was downed, the government "issued an elaborately detailed" through the Powers hearing.

Gary Powers, a Virginia boy of modest means, had a well-paying job. He never expected to become "the most publicized spy in the Cold War." When he failed, many Americans concluded that he was disloyal. When he was exchanged for a Soviet spy, the government "led the effort to banish the unpleasant memory of the U-2 affair . . . by casting him in the role of a hero."

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What is the truth? If anything resembling unblemished truth emerges from the U-2 incident, it must take the form of admonition. The directions of a national intelligence operation are necessarily vague and, to the average citizen, incoherent. But if trust is to become the supporting link between the American public and its leadership, it must be certain in the public mind that the true directions of intelligence are not ambiguous — that, at a given time, government officials know exactly what they are about.

The U-2 affair definitely shows that such a coordinated clarity of purpose was missing — at a time when its absence was fatal. Burdened with such flaws, the next question is begged: Can the American people trust the men, policies and logic which govern the "secret" aspects of operation?

The answer to this question, too, remains impaled in the shadows surrounding the extraordinary incident of May 1, 1960.